Internet users beware of the e-mail virus on the loose

Internet users beware of e-mail virus on the loose

Manohar Khushalani

New Delhi

IF YOU thought the menace of computer viruses are under control, you are mistaken. Because what is now in the offing could best be described as the atom bomb among viruses.

An organisation in Atlanta, USA, called NESTSTEP has issued an Internet virus warning. If this warning is heeded then those who are surfing the Net for e-mail and other services may want to pay close attention to this. While currently this warning applies to users of Prodigy, America OnLine, CompuServe and most of the other on-line services which provide e-mail access to the Net in USA, the Indian networks like ERNET, NICNET, UUNET and Axcess might get hit soon.

Some miscreants are sending E-Mail under the title "Good Times" nationwide in USA. Considering the fact that India is now on the Information highway, "Good Times" may strike us soon. According to NESTSTEP, if you get anything like "Good Times" you could be in for a bad time. Delete the file immediately. Without reading it. It essentially re-writes your hard drive, thereby blowing away anything that you had on it. You are left with an empty hard disk that must be reformated and have all of your software re-loaded onto it.

The FCC, an online news service, released a warning last week concerning a matter of major importance to any regular user of the Internet. Apparently, a new computer virus has been engineered by a user of America Online that is unparalleled in its destructive capability. Other more well known viruses, such as Stoned and AirWolf, pale in comparison to the prospects of the newest virus in the Net.

What makes this virus so terrifying, said the FCC, is the fact that it can be spread through existing e-mail systems of the Internet. Once a computer is infected, one of several things can happen: If the computer contains a hard drive, it will most likely be destroyed. If the programme is not stopped, the computer's processor (brain chip) will be placed in an Nth complexity, infinite binary loop.

In other words, this can severely damage the processor if left running for too long. Unfortunately most novice computer users will not realise what is happening until it is too late.

Luckily, there is one sure way to detect what is known as the "Good Times" virus. It always travels to new computers/victims the same way — in a text e-mail message with the subject line simply reading "Good Times".

Avoiding infection is easy. Once the file has been received, do not read it, just delete it. The act of loading the file in the mail server's ASCII buffer causes the mainline programme to initialise and execute. The programme is highly intelligent and will send copies of itself to everyone whose e-mail address is contained in the e-mail directory. It will then proceed to trash the computer it running on.